

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A19NEW YORK TIMES
16 December 1986

Bush Staff Knew First of Plane Downing

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Dec. 15 — Vice President Bush's staff received the first word in the Government that a private American cargo plane carrying ammunition and supplies to the Nicaraguan rebels was missing over Nicaragua in October, Mr. Bush's office announced tonight.

The episode shows a much closer relationship than previously acknowledged between the Vice President's staff and the secret private network that was supplying arms to the rebels, known as contras.

The information about the plane was passed on to high-ranking officials of the National Security Council, Mr. Bush's office said. Three crew members were killed when their C-123 went down on Oct. 5. A fourth, Eugene Hasenfus, was captured by Nicaraguan Government forces and was convicted

of terrorism and other crimes.

The disclosures by the Vice President's office were contained in a chronology tracing contacts between Felix Rodriguez, who has been involved in anti-guerrilla activities in El Salvador, and two Bush staff members: Donald P. Gregg, the Vice President's national security adviser, and Col. Samuel Watson, Mr. Gregg's deputy.

Clarification of Relationship

The chronology was released tonight to explain and clarify the relationship between Mr. Rodriguez and Mr. Bush and his aides. It provides the most significant indication to date that the Administration was aware of the clandestine network that provided supplies to the Nicaraguan insurgents.

It suggests that the Administration knew more about the supply effort than it has said publicly.

Spokesmen for the Administration,

the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon have emphatically denied that the flight was in any way connected with the United States Government.

Mr. Bush's office said Mr. Rodriguez called Colonel Watson twice on Oct. 5 and 6 to say he had received information that one of the aircraft supplying the rebels was missing and possibly downed in Nicaragua. It said Colonel Watson then informed the White House Situation Room and the staff of the National Security Council.

In addition, the chronology said Mr. Rodriguez met with Mr. Gregg and Colonel Watson almost two months earlier, on Aug. 8, "to express his concerns" about the secret supply network, including the difficulty in maintaining it and the poor quality of aircraft being used.

Concerns Related to Aides

Those concerns were then relayed by the two Bush aides at a meeting four days later, which included Edwin G. Corr, the Ambassador to El Salvador; Deputy Assistant Secretary of State William Walker, and two National Security Council officials, Raymond Burghardt and Bob Earl. Also present was an unidentified C.I.A. official, the chronology said.

Mr. Hasenfus, 45 years old, was a cargo handler on the C-123. He said immediately after his capture that he was working for the Central Intelligence Agency. But later, in public appearances before a tribunal in Managua, he said he was not sure whether two co-workers, whom he named as Max Gomez and Ramon Medina, were in fact C.I.A. operatives.

The agency has denied any connection with the two men, Cuban exiles, whose real names are Felix Rodriguez and Luis Posada Carriles. They worked with the C.I.A. during and long after the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961.

After his capture, Mr. Hasenfus said he believed that Mr. Gomez was a friend of Mr. Bush.

Mr. Hasenfus's capture set off several Congressional and Federal investigations into whether the supply operation, run from Ilopango Air Base in El Salvador, had links to the Reagan Administration. Mr. Hasenfus was paid by Corporate Air Services, a Pennsylvania-based company that he said was a front for Southern Air Transport. Southern Air Transport, a Miami-based concern that was owned by the C.I.A. until 1973, has acknowledged holding a contract to service the planes used in the supply operation, but has denied any closer ties.

In Perspective: Some New Developments

Frank C. Carlucci, the new director of the National Security Council, plans a thorough overhaul of his organization and has begun by picking aides who are specialists on the Soviet Union and Latin America.

William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, who was scheduled to testify before a Congressional committee today, collapsed in his office with a seizure and was taken to the hospital, where he suffered a second seizure. A doctor said he was "resting comfortably," but his testimony was put off.

The head of a political action group that campaigned aggressively against members of Congress opposed to arming the Nicaraguan rebels had links with others in the White House besides Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, the former National Security Council aide. But there was no evidence to corroborate reports over the weekend that the lobbyist, Carl R. Channell, received diverted profits from United States arms sales to Iran.

The United States periodically supplied its intelligence reports on Iranian military operations to Iraq, despite a policy of neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war.

The Sandinista Government in Nicaragua plans to try the brother of a United States Congressman on espionage charges before the same people's tribunal that last month sentenced another captured American, Eugene Hasenfus, to 30 years in jail.